

**Friday's Feature**  
**By**  
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**Blueberry bushes require some summer maintenance**

Blueberries are one of the most delicious fruits grown in the South. They are also one of the easiest fruits to grow. They require much less maintenance than peaches, plums and other exotic fruits because they are well adapted to our native soils and growing conditions.

Though they are grown commercially, blueberries make wonderful additions to the home landscape. Blueberries are exceptionally handsome bushes worthy of planting. They produce a profusion of white blossoms in late spring. Leaves are glossy green in summer, with outstanding red color in autumn. They can be used as hedges, screens or as specimen plants. In addition to their beauty, you get to enjoy the fruit.

The best time to plant blueberries is from mid-December to mid-February. If you are thinking about adding these shrubs to your landscape, do your homework now on which type and cultivar will do well in your area.

For those gardeners you already know the joy of growing blueberries, it's time to do some summer maintenance to ensure that they remain healthy and productive.

Although frequent pruning is not really necessary under most landscape conditions, some appropriate pruning will benefit the plant. Most pruning is done immediately after harvest in the early summer. Pruned plants must have enough time to put on new growth and set flower buds before winter. Fall or early spring pruning may cause the loss of an entire season's fruit.

Pruning mature blueberry plants is largely a matter of cane removal or cane thinning. A general rule is to remove  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{5}$  of the oldest canes each year. This usually means that you will remove one to three of the oldest canes. How will you know which ones are the oldest? Blueberry canes are like most humans, they get wrinkled and gray as they age.

Blueberries will also benefit now from some fertilizer. They respond best to light fertilization. They can actually be killed or damaged by over fertilization. If you want to increase the fruit yield or berry size, apply two to three light applications of fertilizer during the growing season. But not just any fertilizer will do.

Blueberries should be fertilized with an ammoniacal type of nitrogen or nitrogen from urea or organic sources. A special formulation called "blueberry special" is

available and meets these requirements. Another possibility is “camellia-azalea” fertilizers which are readily available to home gardeners.

When deciding how much fertilizer to apply, think ounces instead of pounds. If your plants are mature (three years old and older) use three ounces of fertilizer per plant per application. Spread the fertilizer evenly over a four foot diameter circle.

Another summer maintenance chore is mulching. Mulch moderates soil temperatures, aids in weed control, provides protection from mechanical injury and adds organic matter to the soil. Weed control is extremely important for young plant establishment because blueberries are shallow-rooted plants that compete poorly with weeds for water and nutrients.

**Tip of the Week:** Tomato harvest is ending in most local gardens. The reason is related to temperature. Tomatoes are, for purposes of pollination and fruit set, very sensitive to night temperatures. When night temperatures creep near the mid-seventies, pollination slows down or ceases. The small fruited or cherry tomatoes however, will continue fruiting to some degree throughout the summer.

Plants that have stopped producing should be removed from the garden – roots and all. Though tomatoes are perennials, keeping plants healthy throughout the remainder of the summer is usually not feasible.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names in this article is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.